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US-Cambodia Relations October 1989

Background: The Cambodian-Vietnamese conflict is centuries old. In its current episode, attacks by Cambodia's ruling Khmer Rouge faction on villages in Vietnam led in December 1978 to a full-scale Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia and the end of nearly 4 years of the Khmer Rouge's bloody rule.

During the decade since then, the US has worked with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) and other interested parties--most recently at the Paris International Conference on Cambodia, July 30 to August 30, 1989--in pursuit of three objectives:

- Verified withdrawal of Vietnamese troops;
- Prevention of a return to power of the Khmer Rouge; and,
- Genuine self-determination for the Cambodian people.

Four Cambodian factions: The key issue for the near term is whether the Cambodians themselves can join together in national reconciliation. The four principal factions are:

- Noncommunist Resistance: Two of the factions constitute the Noncommunist Resistance: the Sihanouk National Army, under former monarch and head of state Norodom Sihanouk; and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, headed by former Prime Minister Son Sann. The noncommunist groups' forces are smaller than the two communist factions: the Sihanouk National Army has about 20,000 troops and the Khmer People's National Liberation Front, 14,000. The US supports the Noncommunist Resistance politically and materially and believes that an interim coalition government to guide the country to democratic elections should be led by Prince Sihanouk, with the Noncommunist Resistance in a substantial role.

- Khmer Rouge: The Khmer Rouge is a Marxist-Leninist group that took power in 1975 and established one of the most brutal regimes of modern world history. With 30,000-40,000 troops, however, the Khmer Rouge has fought against the Vietnamese occupiers. Despite announcements of his retirement, the infamous Pol Pot continues to lead the Khmer Rouge and, with his henchmen, intends to regain dominance in Cambodia. The US is unalterably opposed to the Khmer Rouge's return to power. A comprehensive settlement is the most effective way of assuring that this group will be contained. The alternative is continued warfare, with an unpredictable outcome. Our strong preference would be that there be no Khmer Rouge participation in future Cambodian Governments. Prince Sihanouk and ASEAN, however, have said that Khmer Rouge elements should participate in the transitional political process. We make clear that our ability to support any permanent Cambodian Government is inversely related to the degree of Khmer Rouge participation, if any, in that government. As Secretary Baker said at the Paris conference, "There must be safeguards that Pol Pot and other Khmer Rouge leaders responsible for mass murders will never dominate Cambodia again."

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- People's Republic of Kampuchea: In the wake of their 1978 invasion of Cambodia, the Vietnamese installed a group of former Khmer Rouge functionaries in Phnom Penh. Led by Heng Samrin and Hun Sen, the regime now calls itself the State of Cambodia and maintains an armed force of about 50,000 backed up by a large number of militia forces. Because of the way in which it was imposed and maintained by the Vietnamese, the Phnom Penh regime is largely unrecognized internationally.

Paris conference: The Paris conference, attended by 19 countries, including the US, the UN Secretary General, and the four Cambodian factions, did not achieve a comprehensive settlement but made some progress. The negotiating process continues by consultation with a view toward reconvening the conference to finalize a solution.

Vietnamese troop withdrawal: The Vietnamese announced that they had withdrawn the last of their 200,000 troops from Cambodia in late September 1989. The withdrawal was not verified, and it is impossible to confirm what Vietnamese presence remains. The Vietnamese have a greater obligation, however, than just withdrawing from a civil war. They must participate constructively to bring about a settlement that combines an equitable and stable political reconciliation with national independence.

UN role: As Secretary Baker said in Paris, an effective international control mechanism and peacekeeping force, under the UN, must play a central role in the peace process. Aside from verifying a complete Vietnamese withdrawal, it would provide some assurance against a Khmer Rouge return and monitor the process leading to democratic elections.

US policy: Three propositions underlie the Bush Administration's approach to Cambodia:

- The Cambodian people have a right to national sovereignty, self-determination, economic progress, and, above all, assurances against a return to dominance by the Khmer Rouge.
- A key US security obligation is to Thailand, to which the US is legally bound by the 1954 Manila pact.
- The US has a strategic objective in seeing Indochina free of great-power rivalries.

US action: The Bush Administration is working on three levels to build on the Paris conference. It is:

- Maintaining active contacts with the four other permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, UK, and USSR). China and the Soviet Union have the most direct influence in Cambodia;
- Continuing to work closely with the ASEAN states in support of a political resolution of the conflict; and
- Maintaining our support for Prince Sihanouk and the noncommunist factions as the key element in a negotiated settlement leading to an interim coalition followed by internationally supervised elections.

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